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Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on further development of topics for a pilot thematic evaluation

Note by the Secretary-General

In conformity with General Assembly resolutions 48/218 B of 29 July 1994 and 54/244 of 23 December 1999, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on further development of topics for a pilot thematic evaluation, as requested by the Committee for Programme and Coordination. The Secretary-General takes note of its findings and concurs with its recommendations.

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Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on further development of topics for a pilot thematic evaluation

Summary

The present report has been prepared in response to the request by the Committee for Programme and Coordination that the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) further develop topics for a pilot thematic evaluation for consideration by the Committee at its forty-fourth session (A/58/16, paras. 529-530).

Thematic evaluations will focus entirely on a single, cross-cutting theme or activity. By providing a systemic assessment of a specific issue or topic, these evaluations can provide strategic and timely information for decision-making with regard to programme content, structure, implementation and results as well as an assessment of coordination and cooperation on the same theme between different programmes in the United Nations. Thematic evaluations can also play a role in strengthening the monitoring and evaluation capacity of the United Nations system, as called for by the Secretary-General's reform.

OIOS is suggesting three themes that address current issues and concerns of the United Nations and that would benefit from a thematic evaluation. These are: (a) information systems supporting the implementation of Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development goals; (b) linkages between headquarters and field activities: a review of best practices in the development arena; and (c) contribution of the United Nations to the prevention of and response to natural disasters. Alternatively, the Committee for Programme and Coordination may want to decide on another theme based on the analyses and criteria discussed in the present report.

After consideration of the present report, the Committee for Programme and Coordination may wish to commission OIOS to conduct a pilot thematic evaluation that will be submitted at its forty-fifth session and subsequently reviewed at its forty-sixth session.

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I. Introduction

1. At its forty-third session, the Committee for Programme and Coordination decided to defer to its forty-fourth session the selection of a topic for thematic evaluation, for submission to the Committee at its forty-fifth session and subsequent review at its forty-sixth session. The Committee also requested the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) to further develop topics by elaborating the context, objective, scope, methodology and intended utilization of the findings of proposals for a pilot evaluation. The present report has been prepared in response to that request.

2. Three methods were used for the preparation of the present report: (a) a survey of the programmes of the medium-term plan conducted by OIOS in January and February 2004 regarding the utility of thematic evaluations as well as suggestions for possible themes (18 of 26 programmes responded); (b) a review and analysis of the priority areas of the 2002-2005 medium-term plan, the Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development goals, General Assembly resolutions adopted at the fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth sessions and issues discussed at recent United Nations summits and conferences; and (c) consultations with other evaluation offices within the United Nations concerning their experiences with conducting thematic evaluations.

II. Thematic evaluations

A. Definition

3. Thematic evaluations will focus entirely on a single, cross-cutting theme or activity. With their focus on a single theme, thematic evaluations assess the cumulative effects of multiple programmes that share common goals and purposes and provide an assessment of coordination and cooperation between different programmes of the United Nations.

B. Thematic evaluations in comparison to in-depth evaluations

4. The in-depth evaluations currently conducted by OIOS are comprehensive reviews of a single programme of the medium-term plan. They follow a 10- to 12-year cycle and contribute to the executive and legislative assessments and planning of the programmes of the Organization.

5. While meeting a particular need for comprehensive review, in-depth evaluations do, however, have a number of limitations. Specifically, in-depth evaluations:

- Cannot assess the broader outcomes of several programmes that share common objectives
- Focus only on the objectives of the programme being evaluated and therefore may not sufficiently focus on more current issues and priorities and
- Have a smaller audience since, by their nature, they focus solely on a single programme.

C. Benefits

6. The addition of thematic evaluations to the OIOS work plan would broaden the range of its evaluative tools and approaches. In particular, thematic evaluations would provide a different type of review as well as a different perspective from what is currently offered by in-depth evaluations.

7. Thematic evaluations offer several significant benefits, including:

Greater relevance. Thematic evaluations can focus on current United Nations issues and strategies and provide a systemic assessment of cross-cutting issues. They can answer the most pertinent questions and provide timely information when it is needed.

Increased timeliness. Since thematic evaluations are topic-specific rather than programme-specific, several programmes can be evaluated simultaneously, which would increase the frequency with which important activities of individual programmes are reviewed.

More opportunities for strengthening coordination. Thematic evaluations can identify ways in which to improve and enhance the coordination and collaboration of United Nations programmes sharing similar goals and objectives.

Improved focus on results. Thematic evaluations would look at cross-cutting outcomes, with an increased emphasis on measuring impact.

Enhanced responsiveness. Thematic evaluations can be used by senior managers from several different programmes to identify ways in which to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their programmes.

8. Thematic evaluations can also provide information that would assist the Committee for Programme and Coordination in meeting its mandate. Specifically, the Committee for Programme and Coordination is mandated to review programmes of the United Nations as defined in the medium-term plan (including giving guidance to the Secretariat on programme design) and to assist the Economic and Social Council in the performance of its coordination functions within the United Nations. The Committee needs strategic and timely information to inform its deliberations and decision-making with regard to programme design, implementation and results. In addition, it needs reliable and valid assessments of coordination and collaboration within the United Nations. As previously discussed, thematic evaluations can meet both of these needs.

9. All respondents to the OIOS survey (representing 18 different programmes) stated that thematic evaluations would be useful to their department or office. More specifically, respondents believed that thematic evaluations would: encourage interdisciplinary approaches and cooperation among United Nations programmes; prove useful for the purposes of planning, policy-making and strategic goal setting; improve programme performance and relevance; and provide an assessment of issues and topics in which several different programmes play a role. Additionally, some respondents said that thematic evaluations could yield useful lessons learned and best practices, which could be used to inform future policy formulations.

10. Several United Nations entities have evaluation offices that conduct thematic evaluations and their experiences can provide useful insights into the practice and

benefits of these reviews. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) undertakes evaluations that are focused on the priorities of its medium-term strategic plan, operational issues and cross-cutting themes, such as modalities of partnerships. According to staff, this approach has enhanced both resource utilization and results. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identifies topics for its evaluations by first meeting with its governing body for suggestions and then consulting with senior managers to select the most strategic cross-cutting topics for review. It then attempts to narrow the scope of these topics in order to make them more manageable. Staff informed OIOS that UNDP uses these evaluations to "feed into decision-making". The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has developed a three-year strategy for its evaluations that is based on six activities, including system-wide evaluations to consider the response of the United Nations to specific thematic issues. According to OCHA staff, these are typically "hot issues", which are demand driven. The evaluations are worked on jointly with other agencies in the United Nations and are used as management and learning tools.

D. Selection criteria

11. Topics selected for thematic evaluations should fall within the OIOS mandate to determine as systematically as possible "the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the Organization's activities in relation to their objectives" (ST/SGB/2000/8, regulation 7.1). OIOS, as a central internal oversight body, is well positioned to contribute to an assessment of the United Nations in a way that evaluation units attached to individual departments and offices are not. One respondent to the OIOS survey represented the views of others by stating, "with [OIOS] expertise in dealing with cross-cutting issues and knowledge of the experience of other departments/offices, [OIOS] is in a better position to deal with general topics".

12. OIOS has used the following criteria to propose topics for in-depth evaluations to the Committee for Programme and Coordination: (a) the importance of the programmes in relation to the priorities of the current medium-term plan; (b) intergovernmental reviews of programmes taking place in the near future; and (c) balanced coverage of all the programmes of the medium-term plan. While these criteria could also prove useful in selecting topics for thematic evaluations, selection need not be constrained by these three criteria alone.

13. OIOS proposes the following general criteria for selection of topics for thematic evaluations:

- Adequate coverage of the programmes of the Organization
- Schedule of related intergovernmental reviews
- Timeliness of the review
- Significance of the issues being addressed
- Strategic importance to the United Nations
- Contribution to improving the programmes of the United Nations.

E. Role in the Secretary-General's reform of the United Nations

14. The Secretary-General's agenda for United Nations reform calls for strengthened monitoring and evaluation. The Secretariat is considering various strategies to enhance the evaluation capacity of the Organization. Examples of these strategies include better use of evaluation results for programme planning and updating the evaluation format and presentations to make evaluations more pertinent and useful to intergovernmental bodies and programme managers. It is the opinion of OIOS that its undertaking of thematic evaluations will contribute to the strengthening of the evaluation capacity of the United Nation.

III. Proposed evaluation themes

A. Possible themes for consideration

15. In its above-mentioned survey, OIOS asked respondents to suggest possible themes for evaluation. Fifteen of the 18 respondents, representing 15 different programmes, offered suggestions, which are shown in table 1 below. The main reasons respondents gave for suggesting these themes is that they were of high priority to their programme or to the Organization and/or that the themes identified an area of concern that warranted further study.

Table 1
OIOS survey
Suggestions for themes

Broad theme	*Related topics*[a]	*Number of respondents suggesting theme*[b]
Development	• Information and communication technologies (ICT) for development • Development partnerships among United Nations programmes • Role of the United Nations in implementing the Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development goals: resource mobilization and achievement • United Nations capacity-building in development • Promoting good governance for sustainable development • Links between peace and development	8
Information systems of the United Nations	• ICT for development • United Nations web sites • Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development goals: statistics, data collection, analysis, monitoring and knowledge sharing • Knowledge management • Communicating the United Nations message in the Middle East	7

Broad theme	*Related topics*[a]	*Number of respondents suggesting theme*[b]
Role/collaboration of United Nations with civil society	• Role of the United Nations in government policy-making (gender mainstreaming and integration of sustainable development) • Role of the United Nations in the follow-up by Governments to international agreements • Role of the United Nations in implementing the Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed goals: resource mobilization and achievement • Contribution of the United Nations to the prevention of and response to natural disasters • Effectiveness of the United Nations in engaging civil society to pursue United Nations goals • Role of the United Nations in crime prevention and human trafficking • United Nations capacity-building in development • Promoting good governance for sustainable development	6
Operations and governance of the United Nations	• Development partnerships among United Nations programmes • Governance structure of United Nations bodies • Maintenance of a flexible work force to cope with emergencies • Gender mainstreaming in the Secretariat • Integrated humanitarian missions • Cost-effectiveness of United Nations programmes and activities • Coordination and consolidation of monitoring and evaluation	6
Peacekeeping and peace-building	• Exit strategies for peacekeeping operations • Development of regional peace strategies • Post-conflict peace-building • Implementation of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes • Use of quick-impact projects in peacekeeping operations • Links between peace and development • Interface between human rights and peacemaking	3

[a] Some topics relate to more than one theme.

[b] Some respondents suggested more than one topic for each theme and some topics were suggested by more than one respondent.

16. In order to identify current United Nations issues and priorities, OIOS also reviewed and analysed the following United Nations documents: (a) the medium-term plan (focusing, in particular, on its priority areas); (b) the Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development goals; and (c) resolutions adopted at the fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth sessions of the General Assembly. OIOS also reviewed the issues discussed at recent United Nations conferences and summits. The results of this analysis are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2
OIOS review of United Nations documents

Broad theme	*Medium-term plan 2002-2005*	*Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development goals*	*General Assembly resolutions: fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth sessions*
Maintenance of peace and security	x	x	x
Disarmament	x	x	x
Promotion of human rights	x	x	x
Promotion of sustainable development[a,b,c]	x	x	x
Poverty alleviation[b,c]	x	x	x
Improving humanitarian assistance	x	x	x
Combating drugs, crime and terrorism[d,a]	x		x
Promotion of global partnerships[a,b,c,d,e]		x	x
Promoting coordination between United Nations agencies		x	x
Promotion of justice and international law[d]	x	x	x

[a] Discussed at the World Summit on the Information Society (2003).
[b] Discussed in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (2002).
[c] Discussed in the Monterrey Consensus (2002).
[d] Discussed at the United Nations Convention against Corruption (2003).
[e] Discussed in the World Trade Organization Doha Declaration (2001).

17. The broad themes highlighted in both tables above can be reviewed with two different approaches: systemic and substantive. It is the opinion of OIOS that the Committee for Programme and Coordination would best be served by a thematic evaluation focusing on the former rather than the latter approach. For example, an evaluation on poverty alleviation would be too broad and very difficult to examine in-depth; in contrast, an evaluation that looked at the United Nations poverty alleviation programmes that are in place could prove more useful. A systemic rather than a substantive approach would lead to the identification of systemic problems and solutions, and therefore to systemic action. Furthermore, the topic for a thematic evaluation should be sufficiently examined and targeted so as to enable a timely and practical review; an evaluation that is too broad in scope will be too diffuse and, therefore, of only limited use.

B. Evaluation proposals

18. OIOS proposes that the Committee for Programme and Coordination decide on a theme for a pilot thematic evaluation at its forty-fourth session. To facilitate this decision, three themes are suggested and elaborated on below:

1. Information systems for implementing Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development goals;
2. Linkages between headquarters and field activities: a review of best practices in the development arena;
3. Contribution of the United Nations to the prevention of and response to natural disasters.

These three themes are offered as proposals that would be illustrative of the scope, methodology and reporting that can be expected of thematic evaluations.

1. Proposed theme
Information systems for implementing the Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development goals

Context

In 2000, Member States of the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declaration, which establishes common goals for peace and security, development, human rights, democracy and good governance. In particular, the Declaration includes eight specific, time-bound development goals; all Member States have pledged to meet these goals by 2015. The goals reflect a growing consensus on what constitutes human development and include, among other targets, a reduction by half in the proportion of people living in poverty and the achievement of universal primary education for all children.

The Secretary-General reports annually on progress made in meeting these eight development goals. Therefore, the systems that are in place to collect, analyse and report on relevant data are crucial to assuring that any measurement of progress is both valid and reliable. Furthermore, since the goals relate to a variety of topics, encompassing a wide group of United Nations programmes, coordination and sharing of information is particularly important.

In 2003, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) evaluation office issued a report, *Millennium Development Goals Reports: An Assessment*, which examined the current reporting processes for these goals and assessed the quality, relevance and value added of country level reports for measuring progress. The assessment identified a lack of clarity regarding the real added value of these reports, major gaps in statistical reporting, concerns about data quality and limited strategic thinking on how the United Nations can contribute to the achievement of the goals.

Objective

The main objective of this evaluation would be to identify and assess the current approach of the various organizations of the United Nations system active in collecting, analysing and sharing information on implementing the Millennium

Declaration and other internationally agreed development goals. In addition, the evaluation would review how the organizations of the system coordinate their activities and how they interact as well as identifying opportunities for increased efficiency.

Scope

This evaluation would provide an overall assessment of the capacity of the United Nations system to provide timely, accurate and useful information on progress in achieving the development goals. The evaluation would examine mechanisms for collecting and analysing data and would assess the quality of that data. It would suggest improvements for monitoring and tracking progress and address the issue of knowledge sharing among the different United Nations programmes.

Methodology

The evaluation would use a multi-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, including: surveys of programme and government officials; interviews with experts from relevant organizations; a review of recent studies in the area, a review of policies, procedures and outcomes; and an assessment of pertinent programme data.

Since this is a cross-cutting theme that would encompass a review of the work of multiple programmes, the evaluation would be carried out with the collaboration of evaluation units and officials of United Nations departments and offices concerned with information systems and development issues. Other organizations with relevant activities in this sector would also be consulted.

Utilization of findings

In order to provide a systemic response to the findings and recommendations of the evaluation it would be submitted for consideration to all interested United Nations programmes as well as to the following intergovernmental bodies:

- Regional commissions
- Commission on Sustainable Development
- Commission for Social Development
- Commission on Science and Technology for Development
- Commission on Population and Development
- Statistical Commission
- Economic and Social Council, normally through the Committee for Programme and Coordination, as stipulated in rule 107.4 (f) of the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation.

2. Proposed theme
Linkages between headquarters and field activities: a review of best practices in the development arena

Context

Recent global conferences and the Millennium Declaration have helped to articulate and focus the development agenda of the United Nations. In this agenda, the two aspects of United Nations programmes, implemented at headquarters and in the field, are equally relevant. Activities at headquarters are primarily engaged in norm-setting, policy formulation and analytical activities, while in the field they are concerned with operational and direct assistance to countries. Ideally, the two aspects should be both complementary and mutually reinforcing. The linkages between the two should also facilitate an interface between global policies and national action, as well as between research, policy and operational activities.

Objective

The main objective of this evaluation would be to assess the linkages between the norm setting, policy formulation and analytical activities of the headquarters locations with the operational and assistance activities of the field. In particular, the evaluation would focus on identifying best practices where the relationship between these two functions has resulted in enhancing development capacity at the national level.

Scope

This evaluation would provide an overall assessment of how the activities of the headquarters locations affect and contribute to field operations in the development arena. The evaluation would identify best practices where these linkages have been particularly useful in promoting the United Nations development agenda and assisting countries in reaching their development goals.

In order to scope to allow for a more targeted and useful review, the evaluation could focus on the linkages between the activities of headquarters and field locations for one particular aspect of development, such as poverty alleviation or education. It could also use a few different countries or regions as case studies to identify and review best practices as well as lessons learned from past experiences.

Methodology

The evaluation would use a multi-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, including: surveys of programme and government officials; interviews with experts from relevant organizations; a review of recent studies in the area; a review of policies, procedures and outcomes; and an assessment of any pertinent programme data.

Since this is a cross-cutting theme that would encompass a review of the work of multiple programmes, the evaluation would be carried out with the collaboration of evaluation units and officials of United Nations departments and offices concerned with development issues. Other organizations with relevant activities in this sector would also be consulted.

Utilization of findings

In order to provide a systemic response to the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, it would be submitted for consideration to the following United Nations agencies and intergovernmental bodies:

- Regional commissions
- Commission on Sustainable Development
- Commission for Social Development
- Commission on Science and Technology for Development
- Commission on Population and Development
- Commission on Human Rights
- Economic and Social Council, normally through the Committee for Programme and Coordination, as stipulated in rule 107.4 (f) of the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning.

3. Proposed theme
Contribution of the United Nations to the prevention of and response to natural disasters

Context

Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, storms and drought take a heavy toll in terms of loss of life, destruction of economic and social infrastructures and environmental damage. While such occurrences cannot be entirely anticipated or prevented, an important component of disaster prevention involves establishing systems and mechanisms to avoid or limit the adverse effects of natural disasters. Such action can reduce the vulnerability of societies when faced with these disasters.

The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) is the centrepiece of the United Nation's efforts to address natural disasters. The overarching goal of the strategy is to enable all societies to cope with natural hazards. The ISDR secretariat, under the direct authority of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, has been established as one of the main institutional mechanisms of the strategy. The other mechanism in place is the Inter-Agency Task Force on Disaster Reduction (IATF). The ISDR secretariat serves as the focal point within the United Nations system for the coordination of strategies and programmes for natural disaster reduction. The other programmes include the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT). Within the wider United Nations system, the regional commissions and UNDP also play an important role. The ISDR secretariat also plays a role in ensuring synergies between disaster reduction and socio-economic and humanitarian strategies.

In December 2003, the General Assembly adopted resolution 58/214, entitled International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, in which the Assembly decided to convene the second World Conference on Disaster Reduction, which will be held in Kobe-Hyogo, Japan, in January 2005.

Objective

The overall objective of this evaluation would be to review how the United Nations helps prepare for and respond to natural disasters. Specifically, the evaluation would assess the coordination role of the ISDR secretariat, the results of such coordination and the activities of different United Nations programmes to anticipate, react to and mitigate the consequences of natural disasters.

Scope

This evaluation would provide an assessment of the capacity of the ISDR secretariat and the programmes it coordinates to effectively and efficiently deal with natural disasters. Additionally, the evaluation would identify opportunities for strengthening the degree of coordination and collaboration between these programmes as well as with other entities of the United Nations system, such as UNDP.

In order to make it more targeted and useful, the evaluation could focus on how the United Nations contributes to the prevention and response to, including early warning systems for, a particular kind of disaster, such as floods. It could use a few different countries or regions as case studies to review both best practices as well as lessons learned from past experiences.

Methodology

The evaluation would use a multi-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, including: surveys of programme and government officials; interviews with experts from relevant organizations; a review of recent studies in the area; a review of policies, procedures and outcomes; and an assessment of any pertinent programme data.

Since this is a cross-cutting theme that would encompass a review of the work of multiple programmes, the evaluation would be carried out with the collaboration of evaluation units and officials of United Nations departments and offices concerned with disaster prevention and relief. Other organizations with relevant activities in this sector would also be consulted.

Utilization of findings

In order to provide a systemic response to the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, it would be submitted for consideration to the following United Nations agencies and intergovernmental bodies:

- Regional commissions
- Inter-Agency Task Force on Disaster Reduction
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee/Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs
- Standing Committee of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- Economic and Social Council, normally through the Committee for Programme and Coordination, as stipulated in rule 107.4 (f) of the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning.

IV. Conclusions and recommendation

19. **A strong case can be made for the usefulness of thematic evaluations. By providing a systemic assessment of cross-cutting issues and topics, these evaluations can provide strategic and timely information for decision-making with regard to programme content, structure, implementation and results. Furthermore, they can provide an assessment of coordination and cooperation on the same theme between different programmes in the United Nations. Thematic evaluations can also play a role in strengthening the monitoring and evaluation capacity of the United Nations system, as called for by the Secretary-General's reform.**

20. **After consideration of the present report, the Committee for Programme and Coordination may wish to commission OIOS to conduct a pilot thematic evaluation that will be submitted at its forty-fifth session and subsequently reviewed at its forty-sixth session. The Committee should consider the selection criteria suggested by OIOS as well as the three themes presented in this report when making its decision on which theme to select and should also decide what relevant intergovernmental bodies are to be involved in considering the pilot evaluation.**

21. **The Committee for Programme and Coordination may consider transmitting the pilot thematic evaluation, with the Committee's conclusions and recommendations, to the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination for action, as appropriate.**

Recommendation
Pilot thematic evaluation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services

The Committee for Programme and Coordination requests the Secretary-General to entrust the Office of Internal Oversight Services with the pilot thematic evaluation of a theme to be decided upon by the Committee. The report on the thematic evaluation will be considered by the Committee at its forty-fifth session and the usefulness of the pilot project will be reviewed by the Committee at its forty-sixth session.

(*Signed*) Dileep **Nair**
Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services